



Washington State Senate

The Benton Bulletin

17TH LEGISLATIVE DISTRICT UPDATE FROM SENATOR DON BENTON

2005 SESSION UPDATE

The Legislature convened on Monday, January 10 for its regular 105-day session scheduled to end on April 24. It is my pleasure to share with you some of the issues that have already surfaced in Olympia.

Election reform

The close governor's election brought to light the inadequacies in our state's election system and has resulted in several legislative proposals to fix Washington's broken system. Senate Republican Caucus election reforms now fit into the following five themes:

- **Reregistration:** Cleansing the voter rolls by requiring legitimate voters to reregister and verify eligibility.
- **Identification:** Requiring eligible voters to present identification at the polls to ensure they are legitimate.
- **Standardization:** Developing statewide rules and standards so everyone's votes are handled in an equitable manner.
- **Reconciliation:** Making sure we have a voter for every vote cast.
- **Military accommodation:** Making sure our men and women protecting our country abroad can cast their votes in a timely manner.

BUDGET: Legislature faces revenue shortfall, Republicans reject call for new taxes

At least a \$1.5 billion shortfall is expected for the 2005-07 biennium. The problem arises from the assumption that the state will:

- continue all current services to include funding the 400 percent increase in pension costs for the next two years and the 11 percent annual inflation cost of health care;
- maintain a \$300 million emergency reserve fund;
- pay the new costs of state employee collective bargaining;
- fund I-732 teachers' cost of living increases;
- fund I-728 class size reduction; and
- fund increased higher education enrollments.

The revenue shortfall climbs to \$1.8 billion if we maintain the emergency reserve fund at its current level of \$641 million and climbs even higher now that the state Supreme Court struck down the state's collection of the estate tax, which is estimated to cost the state \$431 million over the next two years.

Under Senate Republican leadership during the 2003 budget negotiations, we were able to cushion the \$2.6 billion revenue shortfall without raising taxes. Democrats should be able to do the same with a far smaller budget problem.

A bill I co-sponsored provides for an annual inflation adjustment to help senior citizens and persons retired on disability qualify for property tax exemptions.

Washington voters approved an amendment to the Washington State Constitution many years ago to allow the state to help senior citizens stay in their homes by allowing those with low incomes to qualify for property taxes exemptions. The Legislature has adjusted the level of qualifying income many times over the years. **Senate Bill 5361** directs the state Department of Revenue to annually increase that qualifying income level to reflect the increased cost of living.

Senate honors the men and women who serve in the Washington National Guard

Members of Washington's National Guard are everyday heroes from helping people in natural disasters to defending the freedom to self-govern in Iraq. In many ways they put their lives on the line to save others. During a touching ceremony in the Senate on January 26, the members of our state's Guard were thanked and honored. A Washington state flag that had been flying over Camp Anaconda, the largest support base in Iraq, will hang in the Senate Chambers until all Washington National Guard members have returned from Iraq.



Senator
Don Benton

Committee assignments:

- Financial Institutions, Housing & Consumer Protection, ranking Republican
- Government Operations & Elections

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Protecting Washington’s school children

There is nothing more important the Legislature can do than to ensure a safe learning environment for our schoolchildren, free from sexual predators and pedophiles.

Last year, I worked across party lines with Sen. Jeannie Kohl-Welles to pass a package of legislation in an effort to do just that:

- **Senate Bill 6171** requires all investigations regarding certified school employees accused of misconduct to be concluded within one year, regardless of the current teaching status of the school employee, allows parents and members of the community to file complains regarding school employee behavior, and requires proper reporting from school employees of suspected misconduct by co-workers.
- **Senate Bill 5533** requires school districts to share information regarding school employee misconduct.
- **Senate Bill 6220** outlines and clarifies misconduct reporting requirements

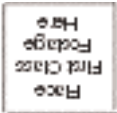
This year, I am continuing my efforts to make our schools safer for our schoolchildren:

- **Senate Bill 5568** requires the state to pay for background checks of certified public school employees when required by state law because of a lapsed teaching certificate or return to the teaching profession.
- **Senate Bill 5677** permanently revokes the teaching certificate of teachers found to have used school equipment, like computers for Internet access, for sexual gratification, or to have possessed pornography on school grounds.
- **Senate Bill 5797** requires any letter of recommendation for a school employee from a former principal or supervisor to include information about known inappropriate sexual behavior on school premises.

Please use this space for any comments, suggestions or problems you would like me to know about. Or call the toll-free Legislative Hotline at 1-800-562-6000.



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